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SUBJECT: POLICE IN WEST BENGAL ASSERT PRESENCE IN ALLEGED MAOIST
STRONGHOLD

REF: A. MUMBAI 291
[1](#)B. KOLKATA 167

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[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Joint operations by state and central police have brought more areas under control in and around West Bengal's rural Lalgarh without any significant opposition from the armed groups of the Communist Party of India - Maoist (hereinafter referred to as Maoists, also known as Naxalites). The true extent of the Maoist presence and threat it poses to the central and state governments remains unknown and suspected Maoist presence remains largely confined to rural, forested areas. Civil rights activists and independent observers reported no major incidents of human rights violation from the police action. Differences exist between the state and the central government over application of anti-terror statutes and banning the CPI - Maoists organization.

Police Re-assert Control Over Lalgarh and Surrounding Area

[1](#)2. (SBU) State and central police have continued their police action against the Maoists in West Bengal's West Midnapur district (Reftel B). On site journalists told PolFSN that apart from a few landmine explosions and small skirmishes involving sporadic gun fights, the police contingent faced no significant resistance or large attacks from the Maoist groups such as that which recently occurred in Chhattisgarh (Reftel A). No large Maoist strongholds or supplies have been discovered. In the absence of any large scale fighting, villagers have begun returning to their homes. According to press reports, individual party workers or affiliates of the ruling state government, the Communist Party of India - Marxist, are being intimidated, assaulted and killed by unknown assailants, who may possibly be Maoists, political rivals or individuals with grudges to bear. Suspected Maoist presence remains largely confined to rural, forested areas in which there is little known American physical presence.

No Evidence of Human Rights Violations

[1](#)3. (SBU) A human rights activist, who recently returned from Lalgarh, saw no evidence of police atrocities or other human rights violation in the villages. He said the police were very cautious, especially after India's National Human Rights Commission had publicly expressed concern over reports of police deploying local residents to retrieve land mines. However, another activist contended that villagers continue to be reluctant to speak out against police atrocities to maintain impartial and outside of the conflict between the police and the Maoists.

The State Government Views Civil Society Mediation Attempt as Interference

¶4. (SBU) The state government has discouraged civil society mediation during the Lalgarh operation. Despite a general prohibitive ban on travel to Lalgarh, a group of intellectuals from Kolkata traveled to the area and spoke with the leader of one of the local groups protesting alleged police abuse. Post was unable to verify a senior journalist's claim that the group went at the behest of opposition leader and current federal Railways Minister Mamata Banerjee who wanted the group to distance itself from the Maoists so that she could support them and attempt to address their grievances against the state. According to the same journalist, the state government viewed the civil society mediation attempt as political interference in an ongoing law and order operation.

State Government Prefers Anti-Criminal Rather than Anti-Terror Statutes

¶5. (SBU) The state government has preferred charging suspected Maoists with anti-criminal rather than anti-terror statutes. For example, only one individual, the Maoist spokesman Gour Chakraborty, has been charged under the anti-terrorism statute the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) while dozens have been arrested under anti-criminal statutes. The state government has also differed with the central government in its refusal to ban the political party CPI-Maoist, claiming it prefers to challenge it openly within the democratic political system rather than driving it underground.

Comment

¶6. (SBU) The absence of police and Maoist encounters and the lack of evidence of Maoist strongholds or supplies have raised questions about the actual Maoist threat in the district. It appears that the state government reluctantly re-asserted a

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police presence in the area only after prompting from the central government, which has taken a more pro-active approach in addressing the Maoist challenge. The state government, weakened by a disastrous parliamentary poll showing and wary of the effects on the 2011 state assembly elections were any police action to go wrong, is unlikely to have the political will necessary to address the security, development and political challenges posed by Maoists -- whoever and wherever they might be -- in the rural, undeveloped areas of West Bengal. Since state, rather than the federal, governments bear the primary responsibility for law and order in India, the central government's success in addressing the Maoist challenge will depend on its ability to work with and through states such as West Bengal.

PAYNE